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# Framing the debate over teacher unions

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## Abstract

The power of teacher unions in the U.S. has waned since the 2010 mid-term elections. The convergence of business conservatism and teacher accountability ideologies has led to an intense targeting of public teacher unions as a problem, both economically and educationally. Using the target audience framework of Schneider and Ingram (1993), I break down the framing used in the present anti-union movement and explore a local example of anti-union legislation in Pennsylvania. The analysis reveals a socially constructed dichotomy in which victimized children are pitted against greedy teachers. To stem this wave of anti-unionism, teacher unions must recognize their position as public contenders and rearticulate their message using child-first rhetoric.

**Keywords:** teacher unions, policy rhetoric, target audiences

The past three years have been marked by a sharp rise in anti-union legislation nationally. In the midst of a fiscal crisis, teacher unions and local governments have clashed over teacher salary and stability. Unfortunately, as teacher unions battle fiercely for their members they fail to understand the political framing undertaken by their opponents and the ability of those frames to sway public opinion. The anti-union message is prevailing due in large part to the ability to use policy rhetoric to frame unions as powerful organizations that care little for students or quality education. This article breaks down the anti-union movement using the target audience framework of Schneider and Ingram (1993). In the first section, I review the four target audience categories identified by Schneider and Ingram and explain how policy rhetoric is used to frame a problem. Section two outlines the anti-union message, including how proponents have creatively framed the problem of “failing” schools. The third section describes the

setting in which the present anti-union movement has emerged. Specific focus is given to the coalescence of the 2010 mid-term elections and the school reform movement centered on teacher accountability. Pennsylvania House Bill 1369, the Strike Free Education Act, is then put forth as an example of anti-union policy rhetoric in local legislation. A conclusion cautions unions and provides recommendations for unions to reconstruct their public image.

### **Framing, Rhetoric, and Target Audiences**

As a political issue, the outcomes and arguments that surround teacher unions are heavily influenced by how rhetoric is used to frame the policy problem. Frames are interpretive schemas that allow people to categorize and understand reality (Rosen, 2009). They are shaped by the rhetoric or hortatory speech used by policymakers and include simple, symbolic messages that change the hearts and minds of the public (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987; Rosen, 2009). Given the role of education in society and the position of teacher unions within the sector, successful movements in support of or in opposition to union activity must have the ability to direct the public will.

Policymakers, proponents, and opponents choose target audiences that speak to the public's core values and legitimate the policy within the norms of society. Schneider and Ingram (1993) categorize target audiences or populations using a two by two table that juxtaposes a group's political and economic power with their positive or negative socially constructed perceptions. From this typology, four categories emerge: advantaged groups that have substantial power and positive constructions, contender groups that have substantial power but negative constructions, dependent groups that have minimal power and positive constructions, and deviant groups that have minimal power and negative constructions. The public generally supports policies that provide for the advantaged groups and punish the deviant groups. Consequently, although the public often holds resentment toward contender groups, the group's power often leads to advantageous policies that are enacted quietly outside of the public eye. Finally, the policies that support dependent groups are seen as necessary by the public, as many people see a social obligation to help those innocent individuals that cannot help themselves. Unions are classified by Schneider and Ingram (1993) as contenders and students are identified as dependents. I argue that recognizing the public's desire to support dependents while chastising contenders is essential to understand how the anti-union message is framed.

### **The Anti-Union Message**

The underlying problem, which anti-union proponents are attempting to partially pin on teacher unions, is the "failing" state of American public schools. Anti-union proponents believe that by reducing the bargaining power of teacher unions and eliminating their right to strike, teachers and teacher unions will be forced to reorient their work toward efforts to improve the state of schools. This problem is captured in the first sentence of Eberts' (2007) article, "Teachers Unions and Student Performance: Help or Hindrance": "America's need to provide high quality education to its children has never been greater" (p. 176). Teacher unions have been singled out within this larger failing

schools narrative, and three specific claims have been brought forward.

First, critics believe that as the most powerful voice in education, teacher unions have stopped the progress of reform: “Almost everywhere, in districts throughout the nation, America’s public schools are typically not organized to provide the nation’s children with the highest quality education” (Moe, 2011, p. 3). This is an issue Moe (2011) believes is “largely due to the power of teachers unions” (p. 5). He further explains that teacher unions, as an institution, “have compelling interests to represent occupational interests of their members – and these special interests may require that they sometimes do things that are *not* in the best interests of children, quality education, or effective schools” (p. 21, emphasis original). Although Rotherham (2011) points out that there are two sides to any contract, he identifies five practices that unions are currently protecting that hinder the reform movement. Among these are the use of seniority for hiring and firing decisions and the inflexible salary schedule linked to experience and education instead of performance. By clinging to these practices, unions are stagnating reform, marginalizing students, and focusing solely on the financial benefits of their members (Runk & Brouillette, 2008).

The second claim brought against teacher unions specifies how unions prioritize the actors in education, placing the needs of children last, behind teachers and parents. Strikes are pointed at as one way that unions devalue students. Runk and Brouillette (2008), in their article from the *Commonwealth Policy Brief*, identify Pennsylvania as the “teacher strike capital of America”(p. 5), and Boland (2011) points out that, since 1970, the state has regularly led the country in annual number of teacher strikes. Additionally, negative student outcomes are blamed on the unions. Hoxby (1996), in her study using nationally representative, district level data, found in districts with a unionized workforce, dropout rates were 2.3 percentage points worse than in non-union districts. Additionally, in investigating a naturally occurring experiment in New Mexico, Lindy (2011) found that mandatory collective bargaining negatively impacted graduation rates. The 2.65% decrease in graduation rates coupled with the 8.59 point increase in SAT scores led Lindy to conclude that mandatory collective bargaining benefits those already privileged at the expense of the low-performing. The exorbitant spending of school funds outside of instructional support and student programming has also been pointed to by some as an example of teacher unions being inconsiderate to the needs of students. For the 2006-2007 school-year, the American Association of School Administrators reported that approximately 90% of all instruction-related expenditures nationally went to teacher salaries and benefits (Ellerson, 2011). During the same school year, employees of the Pennsylvania State Education Association had an average salary of \$82,801, 110% more than the average Pennsylvania worker (Runk & Brouillette, 2008).

The final claim that speaks to the foundational problem of failing schools concerns school financing. Critics claim that teacher unions increase the amount that taxpayers pay and use the funding obtained ineffectively. Some point to the increased cost of running a unionized school district. Eberts (2007) found that operating costs of unionized schools in comparison to non-unionized schools is 15% higher for elementary schools and 8-12% greater for high schools. A large portion of the difference is collected from the local tax base and redistributed to unionized teachers whose salaries are generally 5 to 12% higher than non-unionized teachers. Between 1988 and 2007, in the state of Pennsylvania, Runk and

Brouillette (2008) note that union demands at the bargaining table led to an absolute increase in local property taxes by 89% after adjusting for inflation. Once the increased tax dollars are obtained, questions arise regarding their efficient use. The school budget in unionized school districts is greater due to increased teacher salary and decreased student-teacher ratios. Combined with the poor graduation rates, this provides evidence of “decreased productivity of school inputs” (Hoxby, 1996, p. 708).

The ability of this problem to compel public and political support relies on the construction of an underlying political idea and the identification of a proper target audience. The anti-union movement focuses specific attention on the symbolic struggle for limited resources in which a dichotomy is created, pitting victimized children on one side and greedy teachers on the other. This idea of limited resources, like all public ideas, establishes “the assumptions, justification, purposes, and means of public action” (Moore, 1988, p. 75). As the idea gains prominence, it has the ability to redistribute power relations, “strengthening one emerging force” – parents acting as proxies for their children – “at the expense of another” (Moore, 1988, p. 77) – teachers. The emerging idea aids the public identification of the target audience. Using Schneider and Ingram’s (1993) two by two categorization of target audiences, I identify teacher unions as contenders and children as dependents. Contenders are powerful but negatively viewed groups. It is easy to rally public sentiment against them but their politically powerful position often means the burdens, or negative consequences set by policy, are merely symbolic. However, Schneider and Ingram note that as more public attention is placed on contenders, policy outcomes directed at the group are increasingly likely to be burdensome. On the other hand, dependents are seen as deserving in the eyes of the public, making it easier for politicians to align with policy that brings benefits to the group. Acting in the interest of the child, solutions to the failing schools problem are handed down to the dependents because they are “not considered self-reliant” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 339). The positioning of the anti-union movement on the political idea of scarce resources in which deserving and undeserving groups are combatants is designed to implore the public to respond.

### **Context of the Anti-Union Movement**

The convergence of two movements following the 2010 midterm elections created a policy window for the anti-union message. The 2010 midterm elections resulted in a significant shift of state level control from the Democratic to the Republican Party, with some of the new Republican governors strongly influenced by tea party supporters. In all, ten states changed from Democratic to Republican control, in contrast to two moving from Republican to Democrat. The new wave of leaders ran on a platform of business conservatism, vowing to reduce state spending and save the struggling economy (Celock, 2011; James, 2011). This political transformation converged with the teacher accountability movement that stemmed from *No Child Left Behind*. Outspoken leaders such as Michelle Rhee of Student’s First and the film *Waiting for Superman* restructured the failing schools narrative to place blame squarely on ineffective teachers (see also Chubb, 2012). After the 2010 elections, the ideology of these two movements, Republican backed business conservatism and education reformer backed teacher

accountability, aligned. Central to the convergence was the role of public teacher unions. Unions were targeted by Republicans who wished to reduce state spending as well as reformers that wanted to make teachers more accountable. The 2012 Republican Party Platform provides an example of how targeted efforts to reduce the power of public employee unions are being celebrated as appropriate and innovative. Specifically, the party platform praises Republican state governors that have “saved their states from fiscal disaster by reforming their laws governing public employee unions” (p. 8). Additionally, the platform reinforces the dichotomy between teacher unions and students by supporting “the needs of students over the special interests of unions” (p. 36).

The new momentum created by the combination of these movements spread nationally following the 2010 election and encompassed states ranging from Idaho to New Jersey. Adamant and outspoken opponents of teacher unions include Republican governors Tom Corbett of Pennsylvania and Chris Christie of New Jersey. Once elected, Governor Christie refused to meet with the state education association (New Jersey Spotlight, 2011) and insisted that shifting more of the insurance burden to public employees was essential for fiscal sustainability (Celock, 2011). In 2011, Governor Christie succeeded in pushing through a bill that would significantly reduce public employee union’s collective bargaining rights and reduce their benefits (James, 2011), a success that he bragged about during his keynote speech at the 2012 Republican National Convention (Lengell, 2012).

Although Governor Corbett has yet to be as forceful in transforming his rhetoric into policy in Pennsylvania, his outspoken position continues to damage the public perception of teacher unions. Joined at the 2011 National Policy Summit of the American Federation for Children by controversial Wisconsin Governor Walker and Michelle Rhee, Corbett’s speech outlined his stance on teacher unions: “in the years since teachers unionized, school districts began to focus too much on contracts, and too little on curriculum. The education model degenerated. It has shifted to a labor management model whose focus has become on teacher-parent-child. That’s entirely backward” (Gibson, 2011).

### **An Anti-Union Example in Pennsylvania**

House Bill (HB) 1369, currently under review by the Education Committee in Pennsylvania, illustrates a state level example of reform situated within the wave of change spanning the country. Pennsylvania is situated in the most unionized region of the country, in which 98.4% of public school teachers are union members (Carini, 2008), and is one of only 13 states that grant unions the right to strike (Krauss, 2011). PA Act 88 provides the present boundaries for unions striking and collective bargaining in Pennsylvania. Between the signing of Act 88 in 1992, and 2007, 3.6% of Pennsylvania’s 500 plus school districts had more than one strike and 77% had none (Zwerling, 2007). The annual strike rate continues to decline in the state: between 2001 and 2011 the state average was 10 strikes per year, from 2006 to 2011 the average was 9, and for the 2010-2011 school year, the state had only 3 strikes (Boland, 2011).

Pennsylvania Republican Representative Rock recently reintroduced the “Strike

Free Education Act.” Attempts made by Rock to push the bill through in 2007 and 2009, prior to the 2010 wave of anti-unionism, failed. The underlying assumption of the act is that strikes, and to a lesser extent powerful teacher unions, are detrimental to the well being of students. His memorandum identifies Pennsylvania as the “teacher strike capital” with 34,900 students locked out of the classroom at some point during the 2009-2010 school-year. To support the bill, Rock supporters have maintained the website “Stop Teacher Strikes in Pennsylvania” and Rock has estimated over 210 Pennsylvania school districts were at risk of strike during the 2009-2010 school-year (Rock, 2009). The Strike Free Education Act was submitted to the House of Representatives in June of 2011 and sent to the education committee for review as House Bill 1369.

Five goals are present in HB 1369, all of which, according to bill supporters, will address the underlying assumption that unions are damaging to students: (1) End teacher strikes; (2) Ensure that financial penalties are rendered to those that choose to participate in a strike; (3) Provide additional structure to the negotiation process; (4) Reduce teacher input on school management; (5) Redirect the focus of teachers back to education to ensure that “all energy will be put on furthering education, rather than on strikes” (Johnston, 2011).

To succeed, Representative Rock must make narratives around public ideas and target audiences normative to the public, where the anti-union message resounds in the personal beliefs of community members. The likelihood that the bill will pass increases when the public regards the anti-union position as common sense, indicating a reshaping of the public consciousness and an increase in the public pressure on legislatures to support the bill (Fowler, 2009). At that point, public support will be overwhelming because striking teachers will be seen as against the status quo.

## **Conclusion**

To combat the swelling support for the anti-union movement, teacher unions must recognize that they act within a public arena, and they must understand their perceived position as contenders. Understanding that contenders do not have widespread support, they must rearticulate their message as one that clearly benefits students. “Although they recognize that benefits may flow through teachers to their students, teachers unions fail to emphasize a child-first message in their public discourse, making it appear that unions see children as a by-product and opening them up to further attacks” (Smith, 2012). It is only through re-prioritizing their policy rhetoric to re-emphasize their work with children that unions can withstand the current wave of anti-unionism.

Nationally, teacher unions are not ignorant of the public attacks and are slowly adjusting their dialogue by increasing the focus on students. In Table 1, I show the mission statements of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA). Prior to 2012, neither national union incorporated students into their mission statement. Presently, the NEA still fails to include students in their mission statement, but students are acknowledged in their vision statement, which is referenced less often. To investigate the shift in recent years in which “the long-standing mission of unions to advocate for students and members has been challenged” (Bascia &

Osmond, 2012, p. iii), the NEA recently completed a comprehensive literature review on teacher unions and their role in education reform. In this review, authors Bascia and Osmond (2012) suggest that teacher unions must “express a different, more productive message about teaching and schooling” (p. 21). However, noticeably absent from their five concrete recommendations is a re-imagining of students in the public discourse of unions.

**Table 1: Past and Present Mission Statements of AFT and NEA.**

<b>American Federation of Teachers</b>	<b>National Education Association</b>
<p><b>Pre-2012:</b> The mission of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, is to improve the lives of our members and their families; to give voice to their legitimate professional, economic, and social aspirations; to strengthen the institutions in which we work; to improve the quality of the services we provide; to bring together all members to assist and support one another; and to promote democracy, human rights, and freedom in our union, in our nation and throughout the world.</p>	<p><b>Pre-2006:</b> To fulfill the promise of a democratic society, the National Education Association shall promote the cause of quality public education and advance the profession of education; expand the rights and further the interest of educational employees; and advocate human, civil, and economic rights for all.</p>
<p><b>Present:</b> The American Federation of Teachers is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, health care, and public services for our students, their families, and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining, and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.</p>	<p><b>Present:</b> Our mission is to advocate for education professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world.</p>

Unfortunately, the time for teacher unions to recognize the value of target audiences is quickly coming to an end. With each anti-union victory, unions are increasingly limited to negotiating only for wages and benefits. If the present trend continues, then any negotiation or potential strike must legally be limited to these issues (McKinney & Rossi, 2011). The inability of teacher unions to fight for anything other than wages and benefits will reinforce the public stereotype of unions as greedy



contenders, unwilling to look out for what is best for the children.

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